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# On Balzac*

***Fredric Jameson***

*Unwrapping Balzac* is a commentary on the novelist's first bestseller—his breakthrough, and also a long symbolic narrative fable of a type he will never write again. *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Ass's Skin*—but it would be interesting to list the various attempts to fashion an English title for this novel) is certainly Balzacian through and through in its rhetoric and its world of objects and characters, but the tale itself—part of Balzac's cycle of fantastic tales ("contes philosophiques") of the early 1830's and published together with a collection of the latter—would seem to have its deeper affiliations with Goethe's *Faust* and its degraded progeny (the epics of Edgar Quinet, for example) than with *Le Père Goriot* or *Madame Bovary* (or—and this mark of a fundamental break is even more interesting—with *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*).

The tale of the magical skin, which grants your every wish at the price of shrinking a little (when it disappears the owner dies), has the authentic smell of peasant wisdom—the fairytale caution about wishes and the danger of their satisfaction—folkloric material then, like peasant dances incorporated into the sonata, transmuted into that bourgeois art in emergence within an aristocratic or rococo culture. Behind the tale itself, however, behind the narrative motif, can

*Samuel Weber, *Unwrapping Balzac: A Reading of La Peau de Chagrin* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1979).



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be glimpsed an even more archaic ideologeme in which sexual "energy" is spent like money, in which every "expense" of it wastes a little more *capital* that can never be replaced. Significantly, Balzac's own father wrote a little pamphlet on this "Poor Richard" type theme, whose practical capacity for instilling thrift and abstinence all at the same time makes it a quite stunning text-book example of ideology at its most effective. *La Peau de chagrin* could be studied as a more sophisticated reworking of primitive ideological raw material—its adaptation for a Malthusian French middle-class public on the eve of that first great economic "take-off" which was the July Monarchy. Marx can then be put back together with Freud by considering the new product a guilt offering to his own father (whose fantasmatic trace with the text we will observe in a moment).

With this archaic raw material, however, the formal peculiarities of *La Peau de chagrin* are only at a beginning: one would want next to show how the fable—or parable-like structure of the tale as a whole is then, as it were, artificially replicated in its parts and episodes: the immense protraction of the fable in time—like some enormous rubber band—causes a loss of focus on the immediate moral or *envoi* by comparison with fairy tales proper or with La Fontaine's anecdotes. In compensation Balzac, like Goethe, uses all this material as the pretext for a secondary construction in which the various narrative components become episodes in their own right, each of which is allegorized in its turn and made to project a vertical message or moral lesson to its own, one relatively independent of that of the tale as a whole.

I stress this peculiar property of the form of Balzac's novel in order to dramatize a dialectical perspective or framework I feel to be missing in Weber's otherwise so rich and suggestive episode-by-episode commentary on the book—very precisely, in other words, a commentary on the possibility of such an episodic commentary or an account of the conditions of possibility of such an episodic form, in the first place. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Weber never theorizes these discontinuities: on the contrary, he explains them in terms of the overall diagnosis of fetishism offered here (see below) and suggests that the sequence of episodes is to be grasped as something like a music-hall revue: "If the novel of fetishism assumes the form of a revue, it is because its founding desire is the desire to *review* the 'original' non-perception which it denies (and confirms)" (p. 134). But this analysis is not only limited to the last section of the novel, its unitary value as an explanation tends to flatten the heterogeneity of the various episodes out into some smoother type of repetition—thereby losing the wilder spirit of these breaks and shifts, in which the very laws, perspective, and aesthetics of a given episode are wholly altered in the next. It is evident that any attempt to do justice to discontinuities of this type, which are virtually ontological transformations, will involve a tension between the unification of the theory and the multiplicity of its objects, in spite of current and fashionable denunciations of "totality" and "totalization." However, even the most cursory glance at Hegel's



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*Phenomenology* or his greater *Logic* will make it plain that this acknowledgement of realities in convulsion and in the wildest transformation was the most fundamental vocation of the dialectic itself. At any rate, it is appropriate to deplore in advance the absence from Weber's study of any ("dialectical") account of the preconditions, the conditions of possibility, of Balzac's form itself.

This may be more than a question of method: quite properly Weber sees this remarkable test as imposing in advance those two distinct problematics which conventionally bear the names of Marx and Freud. The wish or desire itself, and the object of the wish or the commodity:[1] the themes of two great ongoing meditations which have in recent years come to seem virtually national traditions—the properly "interminable" Lacanian research in France (there are many many more volumes of the unpublished *Seminar* in store for us) and the seemingly more terminable work of the Frankfurt School in the U.S. and West Germany on reification and on what a younger group of German scholars will call *Capitalogic*.

It is a matter of intellectual history that these two traditions and the larger movements (that corresponded to what can in the most general way be called French structuralism and German "critical theory") have never confronted each other, nor been confronted: the West Germans do not seem to have shown much interest in the newer French intellectual exports, while the French began to translate the works of the Frankfurt School at the moment of the wholesale liquidation of French Marxism in the late 1970s and of the dissolution of the role of the political intellectual in France: so that late Adorno, for instance, could be read as a critique of Marxism and a repudiation of the dialectic itself. Such a confrontation is no simple matter to stage: since we do not have here two philosophical systems emitting different propositions within a shared set of presuppositions and cannot compare isolated theses on this or that, but rather with two culturally distinct lines or research and ways of thinking—whose immediate ideological differences are probably less significant than the boundaries of their two "problematics," so useful a term for suggesting the way in which in a finite universe two inquiries might run on and curve infinitely in space without ever crossing one another.

No one is better suited than Weber by background and experience to stage such a confrontation; *Unwrapping Balzac* does so, however, only implicitly, in the way that it locates the one available *ion* that the two chemical masses of Freudianism and Marxism are most likely to share—namely the interface of desire and the object, the phenomenon of *fetishism* (and I put it this way, since the shared use of the *term* or word or concept in Marx and Freud is a little more misleading). Or better still, for Weber here the *ion* that momentarily bonds these two "systems" together is rather *La Peau de chagrin* itself, a text each tradition can share and work over simultaneously with the other. The implication, however, would be that "Freudo-Marxism" as such is unstable, a mirage, the momentary conflation of two systems in movement at unequal speeds and in different directions. But in that case the question of what holds *La Peau de*



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*chagrin* together gives way insensibly to another question, namely what holds *Unwrapping Balzac* together. "It is not the mere 'having' of a desire that is crucial, but its *enuciation,* its *utterance by a voice*" (p. 119): this is the "mediation" whereby Weber (or Balzac) inserts a third term into the Freudo-Marxian conversation, one which it would be easy to formulate as the work of art, or as Language, but which is more precisely identified as *narrative* proper and the act of narration. Indeed, one of the most striking "breaks" in Balzac's novel—one that flings its represented actions on a different plane and powerfully reorients their direction (and our own reading attention)—one of the reversals that marks this strange narrative as peculiarly *dialectical* (it was published the year of Hegel's death)—comes at the moment in which Raphael begins to tell his own life story at the beginning of Part II: the Oedipal story—the glacial father, the stolen purse—modulating into the story of Feodora, the "belle dame sans merci," the devouring mistress—as cold and implacable as the dead Father himself.

Here is then exceedingly rich Freudian material, whose "pertinence" will be reinforced by a review of the Lacanian theory of fetishism itself (the mother's "phallus" fantasized by the anxious and uncomprehending infant, whose magical investments are then transferred to other appropriate substitutes such as a high-heeled shoe). Feodora's own mercenary frigidity then in a sense over-determines this "fetishism" that is both sexual and economic: "through Feodora, Raphael has seen that the presence he desires, the very life of his desire, cannot be *had,* it cannot be possessed ('Je n'appartiendrai à personne,' Feodora tells him). What he cannot *have,* however, he may *become;* this is the ultimate resort and resource of fetishism . . ." (p. 105). Narrative is then one of the ways in which a verbal object is substituted, reassuringly, for the more disturbing and fantasmatic kinds. The bleakness of *La Peau de chagrin,* however, lies here as elsewhere in the inevitable failure of this substitution: just as time passes and you die anyway, whether you are able to keep yourself from desiring or not, so also here the narrative reappropriation of the past seems to *shrink* it as well:

> The process of summoning up ten years of suffering menaces it to the *quick:* 'Vue à distance, ma vie est comme réctrécie par un phénomène moral.' Is it purely accidental that the first form in which Raphael's life is menaced by the contraction—*le rétrécissement*—otherwise promised by the talisman is associated here with the project of autobiographical narration, the subject recounting his life? Raphael's past shrinks in the phrases he utter to conjure it up just as the *peau de chagrin* will shrink his present and future with every desire he utters. In both cases that eminently reproductive organ which is the voice will reduce what it produces, the life of the subject. It is as though the expense of breath involves a certain fatality, consuming the life that expresses itself through it. (p. 61)



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There is here a baleful yet transparent replication of life by writing, which the imprint of Sterne's squiggle may associate with more properly Shandean cadences, such as the well-known announcement, half-way through that novel, of the narrator's birth:

> I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume—and no farther than to my first day's life—'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back. . . . (Book IV, chapter 13)

Weber astutely marks the shift in registers and in discourses when we move from the enigmatic third-person narrative of the gambling house and the pawnshop through the disembodied orgy of voices that "represents" Taillefer's great dinner to this unexpected first person narrative: "If Raphael raises his voice it is to redeem the caducity of the present, to support and supplement that other voice—the discourse of the narrator—which has already enunciated that present as an enigma, as a sign whose referent is invisible but certain. Against and after the consumptive circulation of the casino, the shop, the orgy—the circulation of the commodity-world—Raphael's voice announces the descent 'into the hidden places of production' (Marx) where the tannery is concealed" (p. 59). Weber's observation, it may also be noted in passing, significantly marks the transition in his own book from a Marxian conceptuality—exposition of the nature of the commodity, etc.—to a Freudo-Lacanian one.

But if it is already rather odd to evoke one great hermeneutic turn—the famous conclusion to Part II, Volume I, of *Capital,* in which Marx invites us to leave the realm of commodity appearance and to descend into the realm in which the secrets of value and production are themselves to be revealed—in order to justify our taking leave precisely of those "Marxian" revelations in order to descend into the Freudian ones which will illuminate them in turn; I must also feel that something more is at stake in this shifting of gears of the Balzacian text than a mere "supplementing" of third by first person discourse.

(One must, however, always pause at a moment like this to honor the genetic explanation, or at least take note of it for completeness's sake: since so much in Balzac (think of *La Femme de Trente Ans!*)—so much that is peculiar and idiosyncratic in Balzac—turns out to be the mechanical effect of his fragmentary compositional methods and his habits of sewing sketches together for some unexpected publication; just as many of the most characteristic Balzacian stylistic and rhetorical effects turn out to have been the afterimage of the suppression of paragraphing and



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even chapter breaks in later editions. The Foedora episode was sketched out a number of years before this novel, and can be assumed to be a foreign body introduced within it;[2] on the other hand, the New Criticism long ago taught us that such genetic or genealogical "explanations"—however biographically accurate—fail to "take" on that very different matter which is the phenomenological experience of the reading of the text in question.)

I would be myself rather inclined to evoke the Freudian notion of the "uncanny"—as misunderstood and misused as that now popular concept has been:[3] all the more since Hoffmann's story, "The Sandman," on which the Freudian note is a commentary, includes analogous structural shifts which determine similarly peculiar effects in it.[4] I think that an account of these last is to be found in the notion of the frame: namely, that a certain type of narrative discourse is established, in which "characters" are taken at a certain narrative or representational distance and assumed to obey a certain narrative logic, only then brutally to be displaced by a narrative with wholly different conventions, most notably with a restructuration of the protagonist such that to him is now attributed a whole range and depth of experience—most notably and significantly family background—which we were agreed to place outside the frame in the initial narrative segment. The shift involved can be described either in terms of convention or of readerly attention: it is as though a "flat" character in a mystery story should suddenly pause and launch into a lengthy and Proustian total recall of the characteristic odors of the childhood kitchen—a supplementary turn of the screw coming when we receive the equally unexpected and useless information that the childhood in question did not even take place in the England of the murder mystery but in some other country altogether—it being understood, finally, that none of this has any bearing whatsoever on the mystery to be solved. Neither "Nathanial" or "Raphael" have any right to childhood or to lengthy childhood reminiscences and evocations of their father, at least on the basis of their narrative function in the earlier section: all of that is somehow beyond the frame in a way that profoundly undermines conventional representation, in a *dialectical* way which is very different in spirit than many of the "subversions of representation" which have been enumerated by contemporary ideologies of modernism.

The same kind of effect is then secured by the shift back from first to third person: in its starkest point in "The Sandman," where the seeming protagonist is suddenly observed from the outside for what he is, namely a "madman" and a most unpleasant and unsympathetic one at that; and this peculiar moment is powerfully amplified and extended by Balzac's far more complicated narrative apparatus in the strange final section of his own novel. To account for these aberrations in terms of "démence" as Weber does in his "Introduction" seems to me to presuppose what needed to be explained in the first place.[5] Nor is "point of view" theory an adequate explanation for such striking bounds or drops in the "level" of reality, although the latter are certainly among other things the object point-



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of-view theory seeks to explain: its deeper vocation is, however, to *repress* such realities and this is a reproach widely addressed to all theory today and which may explain as much as anything else Weber's seeming reluctance, in the present book, to "totalize" his findings and to offer us some "unifying" theory of the novel as a whole.

What is certain is that his own psychoanalytic "interpretations" do not attempt to explain phenomena away but rather to articulate and give a more vivid (dare I even say phenomenological?) sense of those dimensions or events: something which has generally been the strength of Lacanian discourse over the more orthodox Freudian kind. His splendid chapter on the great Heideggerian moment of *La Peau de chagrin*—the visit to the mont Dore, with its extinct volcano, a veritable return to the Being of the earth itself—uses all of the hitherto acquired analytic machinery of psychoanalysis (fantasms, fetishes, primal scenes, etc.) to intensify this extraordinary and unexpected scene, which Weber calls the "mise-en-scène of desire itself." This is not at all to "psychologize" the passage; and all I miss here is some supplementary return to the very "conditions of possibility" of such a moment and such a description within this novel itself: a dialectical indication of the way in which the successive restructurations of the narrative process, and the consequent destruction of any psychic coherence or unity of the "subject," open up an objective space into which peculiar intensities can flow (and the uniqueness of *La Peau de chagrin* in this respect can be measured by their infrequency in later or mature Balzac, in which a powerful narrative apparatus keeps all that in check and under control).

Weber's book, written before Barthes' *S/Z,* but only recently published, concludes with a defensive and quite unnecessary distantiation of his own study from that henceforth classical one: yet while Barthes also—significantly—worked with the narratives of the same period (*Sarrasine* was written during the fantastic tale—"conte philosophique" cycle and shared several early editions with *La Peau de chagrin*), objects and methods are wholly different. *Sarrasine* is a novella with a powerful narrative closure, and the work in a form inherited from Renaissance storytelling: Barthes's effort was to pulverize it, to subvert that powerful unity, and in an x-ray to reveal the play of "codes" that constitute the varous episodes, narrative moments and effects (even though Barthes himself had deep reservations and "mixed feelings" about the scientific character of "semiotics" and the possibility of tabulating codes in this way). Weber is however not interested in codes at all, or in the semiotics of "narrative" in general or in the absolute; nor does he have to pulverize or fragment a text which is already notoriously episodic. Still, to put their differences this way is to ground them in the nature of the *object,* rather than in some timeless realm in which the various "methods" eternally confront one another. The "method," indeed emerges from the object itself, into which, as the latter is gradually unpacked or unwrapped, it should abolish itself again: not perhaps without a few



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concluding remarks to justify its own brief existence.

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## Notes

1 Weber finds a certain authorization in his modulation from Marx to Freud in the deliberate imprecision of the former's conception of "need" or in other words of "use value" (see chapter 6 and the lengthy notes to chapter 13): but either "need" is an anthropological concept of the early Marx (that is, following Althusser, part of a whole humanist *ideology* later abandoned), or it is what is bracketed at the very beginning of *Capital* itself—what remains to be freely reinvented at the onset of a genuine human society and History, and therefore which it is not for us to determine here and now. But in that case, it remains a non-concept and scarcely comparable to the more "positive" category of desire or drive or even wish in Freud.

2 See, for more on this, Graham Falconer, "Le Travail de style dans les revisions de *La Peau de chagrin*," *L'Année balzacienne,* 1969, 71-106, a useful study also footnoted by Weber.

3 For my own reading, see *Fables of Aggression* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 57-58.

4 The Hoffman story, however, begins as an exchange of letters—and shifts its ground on the basis of the long familiarity such letters already presuppose from the outset (it being most improbable indeed that the childhood friend to whom the opening letter is addressed will have known *nothing at all* about the catastrophic experiences of Nathaniel's youth).

5 Weber is there, however, primarily concerned to "subvert" a particularly tenacious inherited paradigm of the literary-historical passage from Balzac to Flaubert: I would have more sympathy with this move myself if I could feel that some *other* paradigm of formal history were being substituted for the older one (my suspicion being that it is diachrony itself which is really here under accusation).



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